

PLAIN TALES  
OF THE NORTH















Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2023 with funding from  
Kahle/Austin Foundation





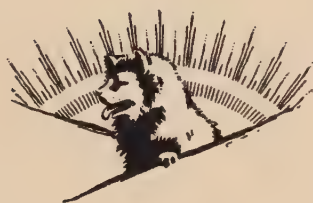


*PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH*



# PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH

BY CAPTAIN THIERRY MALLET



PRIVATELY PRINTED

*Revillon Frères*

FIFTH AVENUE at 53rd Street NEW YORK

M C M X X V



COPYRIGHT · 1925 · BY  
REVILLON FRÈRES · N · Y

# THE TALES THAT ARE TOLD

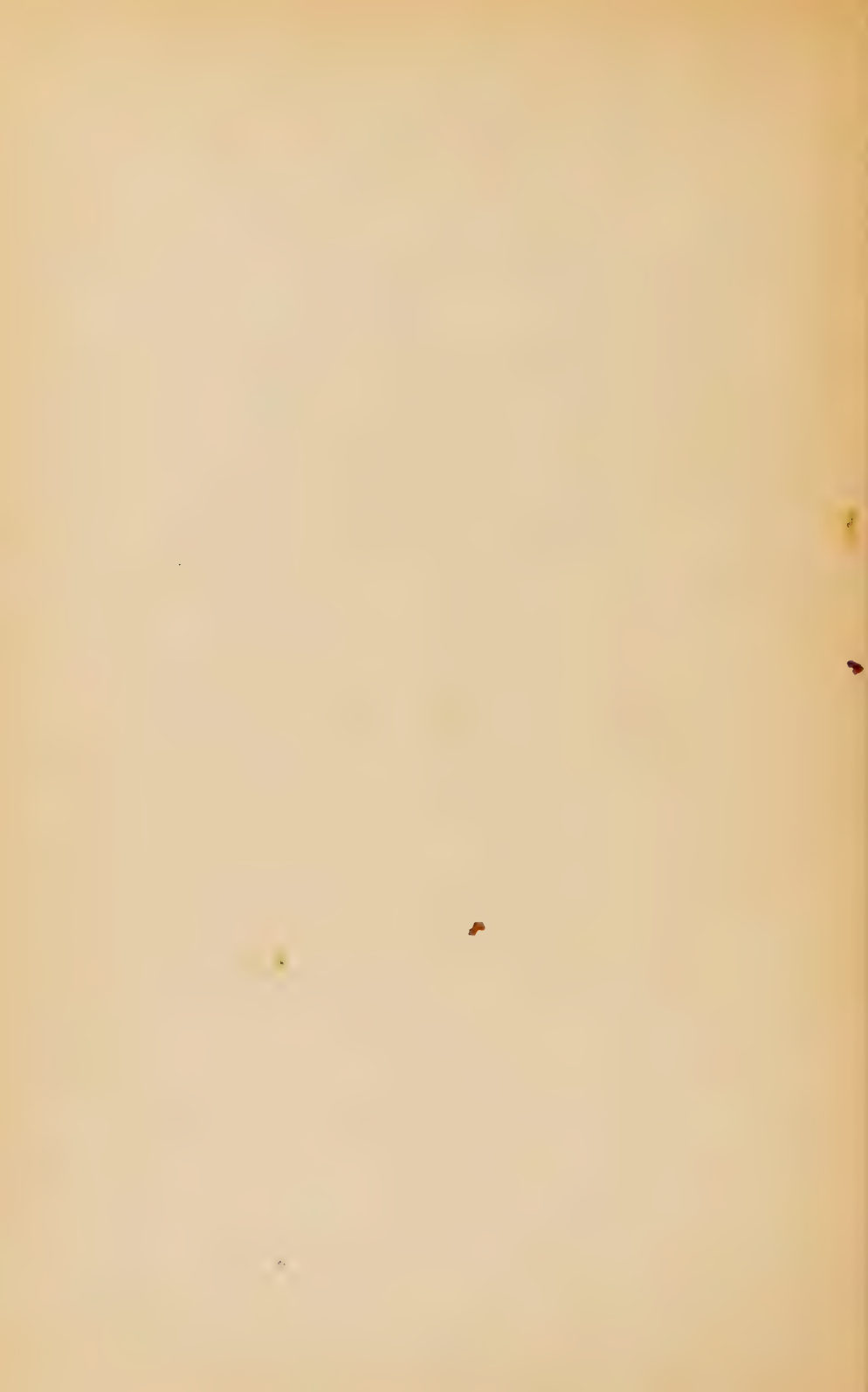
|        |                                     |    |
|--------|-------------------------------------|----|
| I.     | <i>A Grave in Saskatchewan</i>      | 11 |
| II.    | <i>Traveling by Canoe</i>           | 13 |
| III.   | <i>Spot</i>                         | 15 |
| IV.    | <i>In Civilization</i>              | 17 |
| V.     | <i>A Pilot</i>                      | 19 |
| VI.    | <i>Native Mechanics</i>             | 23 |
| VII.   | <i>War News in Husky Land</i>       | 27 |
| VIII.  | <i>A Birch Bark Canoe</i>           | 29 |
| IX.    | <i>A Silver Fox and a Scarf</i>     | 31 |
| X.     | <i>Dead in the Storm</i>            | 33 |
| XI.    | <i>A Strange Team</i>               | 35 |
| XII.   | <i>A Moose Story</i>                | 37 |
| XIII.  | <i>The Little Blue Lake</i>         | 39 |
| XIV.   | <i>Forest Fires</i>                 | 41 |
| XV.    | <i>An Indian Wake</i>               | 45 |
| XVI.   | <i>A Walrus Story</i>               | 47 |
| XVII.  | <i>Mobican . . . The Wolf</i>       | 49 |
| XVIII. | <i>Fighting Against Starvation</i>  | 51 |
| XIX.   | <i>Wild Animals in the Water</i>    | 55 |
| XX.    | <i>Sunday</i>                       | 57 |
| XXI.   | <i>Filming a White Bear on Land</i> | 59 |
| XXII.  | <i>Vermin and Ants</i>              | 63 |
| XXIII. | <i>A Greenhorn in a Rapid</i>       | 65 |
| XXIV.  | <i>Large Fish</i>                   | 69 |

|          |                                                      |     |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| XXV.     | <i>A Little Indian Girl</i>                          | 71  |
| XXVI.    | <i>Outlawed in the Barren Lands</i>                  | 73  |
| XXVII.   | <i>One Thousand Years</i>                            | 75  |
| XXVIII.  | <i>A Practical Joke</i>                              | 77  |
| XXIX.    | <i>Eskimo Arithmetic</i>                             | 79  |
| XXX.     | <i>Caribou</i>                                       | 81  |
| XXXI.    | <i>In Siberia</i>                                    | 83  |
| XXXII.   | <i>In the Hudson Straits</i>                         | 87  |
| XXXIII.  | <i>Whiskey Jack</i>                                  | 91  |
| XXXIV.   | <i>Makejo</i>                                        | 93  |
| XXXV.    | <i>Two Little Eskimo Boys</i>                        | 95  |
| XXXVI.   | <i>An Indian Warrior</i>                             | 97  |
| XXXVII.  | <i>Burro</i>                                         | 99  |
| XXXVIII. | <i>Travelling in North Alberta</i>                   | 101 |
| XXXIX.   | <i>Mother and Cubs</i>                               | 103 |
| XL.      | <i>An Old Trader</i>                                 | 107 |
| XLI.     | <i>Wolverine</i>                                     | 109 |
| XLII.    | <i>Spot . . . Again</i>                              | 111 |
| XLIII.   | <i>Homesick</i>                                      | 113 |
| XLIV.    | <i>The Call of the Wild North of<br/>Fifty-three</i> | 115 |



• A DEDICATION •

To the fearless men of the North  
who braved the desolation of Arctic winds,  
snow and sleet † † † who keep the grey  
timber wolves at bay † † † who navigate  
swift, perilous streams in fragile canoes  
† † † who wrest sustenance from a meagre,  
ice-clad land † † † who face death bravely  
to give to the world the magnificent  
pelts of that far, far North



## BEFORE THE TALES BEGIN

*A word about how they were written*

**P**LAIN TALES, TRUE STORIES OF the North , , , gathered by Captain Thierry Mallet, President of Revillon Frères. Each year begins his new trek to the outposts of the world , , , through Labrador and Northern Canada , , , making the round of fur trading posts by capious canoe or dog sledge. For to garner the stories of the North , as well as the furs , one must be part of the constant struggle of man against man and animal.

Captain Thierry captured the romance of that barren land in his far famed "Nanook of the North" , , , a motion picture which he supervised in one of his trips several years ago. A story of the unusual, the unconventional, the uncivilized , , , it was beautifully photographed under the greatest difficulties. But difficulties seem to be easily overcome by Captain Thierry. Serving in the World War, he was wounded. In spite of that, he came over for the French Republic to train the American doughboys at Camp Meade, Baltimore.

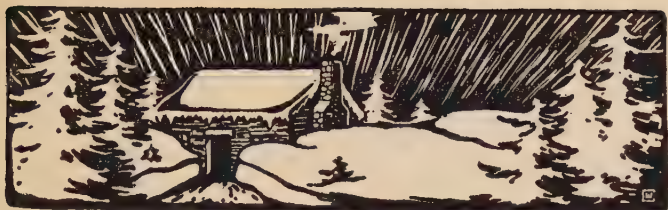
*newly personal  
all things  
nothing  
regarding  
Capt Mallet*





• • • *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH*





## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH

### *Tale I: A Grave in Saskatchewan*

I KNOW A LONELY GRAVE FAR NORTH IN Saskatchewan. It lies on a high bank, facing a small lake, under a cluster of old jack-pines. There is no cross on that grave, neither is there a name.

Four logs, nailed in a square and half-buried in the grey moss, mark the spot where fifteen years ago two old Indians, man and wife, dug a hole six by four and laid to rest a white woman, a mere girl, a bride of a few months.

Fifteen years have passed. But after all these years her memory still lingers with the few Indians who saw her come into the wilderness, wither under the fierce blast of the Arctic winter and die as the snow left the ground and spring came.

She was an American of gentle birth, refined and delicate. Her husband brought her there in a spirit of adventure. He was a strong man, rough and accustomed to the North. She loved him. She struggled bravely through the winter, but the fierce Arctic climate, the utter solitude, the coarse food—these she could not stand. At length, while the man was away for several days tending his traps, she laid herself on the rude cabin bunk and died, all alone.

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

There the Indians found her white and still, and buried her a few hundred yards from the shack, on the edge of the lake.

The man came back later—then left at once. He is a "squawman" now—trapping and hunting in the neighborhood.

Each year his sleigh and his canoe pass along the lake, a stone's throw from where she lies under the jack-pines. Not once has he stopped even to glance at the spot where she bravely lived with him and died alone.

You will find crosses, inscriptions, some kind of token of remembrance on all the Indian graves. Her grave alone, in the Far North, bears neither cross nor name—  
just four logs, nailed together in a square,  
half-buried in the grey moss.



*Tale II:*

*Traveling by Canoe*

**I**T WAS MY LOT, A LONG TIME AGO, TO BRING down a school mistress to one of the Protestant missionary settlements of the far North.

Her luggage was going by steamer, but she chose the canoe route as it was much the shorter way. Her passage had been booked before hand in one of our canoes.

The lady, who was middle aged and very short sighted, had never before left her home town in the south. She arrived at the end of the railroad punctually on time. She dressed severely in black with white celluloid collar and cuffs. She wore ordinary laced boots and cotton gloves and was armed with an umbrella and a small hand bag which could not have contained much more than a tooth-brush. She refused the loan of any more apparel, such as a raincoat or high boots, and took her place in the canoe without a word.

The mosquitoes were terrible. Inside of two hours the poor woman was bitten to such an extent that it hurt us to look at her.

At the first camp fire she took off her glasses, sat on them and smashed them to bits. They were her only pair. After that she had to be led by the hand through the portages and from her tent to the canoe.

We had no trouble in getting her out in time for breakfast at 4 A. M. each morning. One yell from one of us and she was scrambling out of her tent fully dressed and with



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

her hat on. Long afterwards, we found out that she did not even dare take her boots off at night. She was so stiff and bruised that she was afraid she might not be able to put them on again the next morning.

Nothing seemed to surprise nor frighten her. We had one very bad rapid to run. Her canoe was the last one. We waited anxiously to see how she would stand the ordeal. Down the rapid she came; her two Indian guides yelling; her canoe shipping a lot of water by the bow. She was calmly sitting on the little seat we had made for her. Her umbrella was opened and she was gazing at the sky. To this day we believe that she never saw the rapid which was about one mile long.

When we reached our destination, sunburn and mosquitoes had changed her face to such an extent that the missionaries hardly recognized her. Her clothes were in rags. She was covered with mud from head to foot. But her celluloid collar and cuffs were white. She used to wash them by trailing them in the water over the side of her canoe.

I don't think she spoke ten words during the entire seven days of her trip.



### Tale III:

#### "Spot"

**A**MONG SEVERAL HUNDRED "HUSKY" dogs, which I have had occasion to watch during my trips north, I remember one particularly well.

His name was Spot. Grey like a timber wolf with funny pale circles round his eyes, he was faster and stronger than any of the team.

Although too young yet to be promoted to be leader, he showed greater intelligence than any of the other dogs. He made a point to be always on the best terms with his driver and showed great friendliness in camp as soon as he was out of harness. He never shirked his work and was exceedingly jealous of any dog who managed to slack in harness without being seen and punished by the driver.

One day, when hauling as number two behind the leader, he noticed that the latter would slack his traces as soon as he reached the back of the preceding sleigh, travelling in the same direction on the same trail. Spot, raging at the idea that the rest of the team was still pulling while the leader, resting his head on the preceding sleigh, was loafing, would immediately seize the trace with his teeth and throw himself on the snow, obliging the leader by the weight of his dragging body to fall back. He would remain in that position until a gap of thirty feet at least had opened between the two teams. Then, knowing that the leader had to start again pulling

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

his own share, if he did not want to be noticed and punished by the driver, Spot would jump to his feet and proceed with his own work with great energy and triumphant howls of joy.

At all times he was a great fighter and would often get wounded, even if he did succeed in thrashing his opponent. One day, I doctored his wounds with iodine. Ever after, as soon as he was bitten or cut, he would come up and beg for treatment.

I often tried to fool him by applying plain warm water to his wounds. I never succeeded. He would remain whining until some kind of medicine, which he could smell and taste, was rubbed on the sore spot. Anything would do—listerine, alcohol, even tooth paste. As soon as his nose and tongue satisfied him that he had been properly treated with something that he couldn't smell and lick without distaste, he would wag his bushy tail and saunter away quite satisfied.



*Tale IV:*

*In Civilization*

I KNOW HUNDREDS OF INDIANS WHO LIVE SO far North that they have never in their lives seen a motor car, a steamer, a railway or an electric light. A few years ago one of our best hunters asked us, as a great favor, to be allowed to go through the line as one of the crew of the mail canoes which our trader sends twice a year to the nearest town four hundred miles away.

The man had never been there and was very keen to see the white man's land. When he reached the frontier town at the head of the railway he showed no surprise. He inspected thoroughly all that was to be seen and kept his mouth obstinately closed. After a while, knowing that the canoes could not leave before a week, the Indian asked permission to go to Montreal with the mail clerk. The latter, who knew him well and who spoke Cree fluently, undertook to look after him. He traveled for two days and two nights in a day coach and, outside of the fact that he absolutely refused to leave the train at any moment for fear of seeing it go off without him, he appeared to enjoy the trip.

In Montreal he seemed to fight shy of the streets and preferred to remain in the lobby of the small hotel where a room had been reserved for him. He sat there all day, looking through the window.

On his return to the hunting grounds, he met me on my

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

way south and told me how much he had liked his journey to the big city. Through sheer curiosity, I asked him then what had surprised him the most while he was in civilization. Was it the sight of the trains, motor cars, street cars, the telephone, the electric lights or the stone houses? No, none of these things seemed to have impressed him in the slightest. Finally he admitted that there was one thing that had astonished him, and that was the people in the street in front of his hotel. All these people walking so fast and passing one another without a sign. People who never stopped to speak. People who did not seem to know one another. That, he could not fathom at all.





## Tale V:

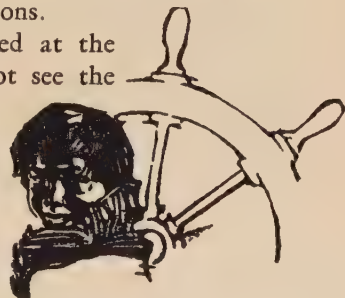
### *A Pilot*

**I**NTO THE LOWER PART OF UNGAVA BAY flows a vicious, treacherous, steel grey river called the Koksoak. Fifteen miles up that river there lies a big trading station which deals with Eskimos from the barren lands and with the Nascopi Indians from the interior of Labrador.

Tides in Ungava Bay vary from twenty to thirty feet. A 3,000-ton steamer can reach the station safely, but she must steam up the river on the flood of the tide two or three hours after the turn. The native pilot alone, through certain land marks known to him, can judge the exact time when to start. He alone can steer the ship's course through the winding narrow channel which, amidst whirlpools and rapids, between rocks and through narrow gorges, leads to a safe anchorage fifteen miles inland in front of the Post.

At first, and during several years afterwards, we had used a small 100-ton auxiliary schooner to bring in the yearly supplies. Finally we decided to take the risk of calling at Fort Chimo, for such is the name of the Post, with our new steamer of 2,000 tons.

That year when we anchored at the mouth of the river, we did not see the familiar face of our pilot. Several Eskimos climbed on board and with them stood a little



lad aged about 12, who, although of sturdy build, was no bigger than a boy of 9 or 10. The natives explained to us that the pilot had died that winter and that the boy, his son, who had always accompanied his father in his piloting up and down the river, would take the steamer to the Post.

We received the news with consternation. We also argued the point. They all claimed that they did not know the river as well as the boy. Furthermore, as piloting seemed to be a family affair, going from father to son, none of them wanted to commit a breach of etiquette by taking the lad's place. During the heated conversation the little chap remained aloof, calm and unconcerned. He had never seen a steamer in his life, and seemed interested not only in the length of the ship but in the height of the Captain's bridge above the water line. We were drawing eighteen feet at the stern. We could not conceive that a boy of that age would be able to realize how deep a channel we needed. We measured out twenty-four feet with a rope and showed it to him. He glanced at it and nodded. In the end we gave in and told him to take charge. He was so small that we had to bring a chair on the Captain's bridge for him to stand on so that he could see above the railing. He did not know a word of English.

For two hours he looked at the shore with a little telescope which he had brought with him. Finally, satisfied with what he saw, he motioned to us to weigh anchor. He had never seen a telegraph but he guessed at once what half or full speed ahead meant. For a long time he kept us going at half. Each time the Skipper, frightened by the eddies which made the ship sag a little in her

• • • *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH*

course, would ring full speed, the boy would motion violently to slow her down. He understood the steering gear. For starboard or port he would look around at the man at the wheel, a big burly Newfoundlander with a grey beard, and make signs with his hand either to the right or to the left. Then he would glance quickly at the bow, judge the swing, and call for "steady your helm" by putting his arm straight above his head.

For two hours he steered us without a second of hesitation. He swung our course from one side of the river to the other. We passed at times thirty feet from a cliff on the shore or an ugly rock showing its head just above the water. There wasn't a buoy or beacon in sight anywhere on the river. The lad had his own land marks somewhere and took his bearings from them. We reached the Post safely and dropped anchor exactly where he told us to.

As soon as his job was over he ran down the ladder to the galley, where the cook gave him a small pot of jam which he hastily emptied with the help of his fingers.

The boy is a grown up man now. He still pilots  
our ship up and down the Koksoak  
River.





Tale VI:

*Native Mechanics*

ANYONE WHO KNOWS ESKIMOS WELL, and who has also traveled in the far East, cannot but notice that the rugged, stocky men of the Arctic have many characteristics of the Asiatics.

Their talent of imitation is one of them. Their complete lack of sense of danger when facing a white man's invention that is absolutely new to them, is another.

Twenty years ago, I recall, a Belgian Engineer on the Hankow-Pekin Railway complained to me of the utter recklessness of the Chinese in the company's employ. The line had been running hardly a year then, and scores of Chinese were being trained to take the place of high-class European laborers—such as engine drivers.

According to the harassed official, all the Chinese were willing workers, exceedingly adaptable and absolutely fearless. They learned the practical side of their job far quicker than a white man would, but they had no notion of what danger was so far as the engine they were entrusted with was concerned. They knew, for instance, that they could obtain a certain speed which they could judge by a certain instrument with an arrow, the figures of which they could not, of course, read. They also knew that they were not allowed to let the arrow go further on the dial than a given point.

But at the beginning they could not see the difference



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

between a straight railway track and a curved one. In consequence, they would never slow up at a sharp curve. When the engine happened to be running at sixty miles per hour—off the track she would go with disastrous results. If by any chance the Chinese engine driver escaped without injury, he had learned his lesson and would not make the same mistake twice. But a lot of them were killed. Furthermore, the engines were invariably smashed. It was very costly to the company. As the Belgian official said, "An Asiatic can learn only through bitter personal experience."

The same applies to Eskimos. Here is one of many examples. One year our steamer brought a gasoline launch to one of our trading posts in Hudson Bay. We wished to use her for towing the barges, full of cargo, ashore. The skipper chose an intelligent looking Eskimo from the crowd and, in a couple of hours, had taught him how to run the engine. The Husky had never in his life seen a gasoline launch before but he tackled his new job with high glee and no signs of nervousness whatsoever.

The first time he was alone in charge, he ran the engine beautifully. He towed a string of barges to the shore but, having no idea of speed, he slipped his row too late. The result was that when he was going around at full speed and heading back for the steamer, the heavy barges, which had too much way on, crashed into the wharf, knocked it down and threw fifty Eskimos or so into the icy water—happily without fatal results.

Meanwhile our husky friend, who had seen the accident but who did not have time to work out in his head the pros and cons of the question, was reaching the ship head-on at ten knots an hour. Heedless of our shouts of

• • • *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH*

warning, he stopped his engine then reversed her when he was exactly two feet from the steamer's side.

There was an awful crash, a cloud of smoke and our new gasoline launch disappeared to the bottom like a stone. The only thing that was left was a thoroughly frightened Eskimo floating aimlessly on the troubled waters, whom we fished out with the help of one of the winches.





Tale VII:

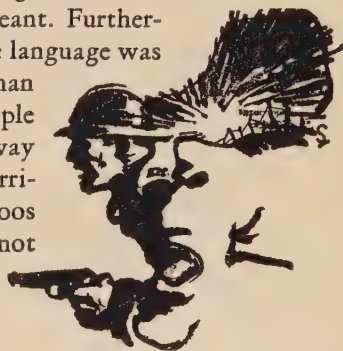
*War News in Husky Land*

WHEN THE WORLD WAR BROKE out in the centre of civilization, news spread quickly until it got to the wilderness. After that it traveled more and more slowly, but in the end it reached the remotest parts of the earth.

In the far North of Canada it took months and months for the news to filter through the barren lands.

In a lonely outpost on Hudson Bay, the one white man who lived there heard of the War, for the first time, eight months later—in March, 1915, to be exact. It was only a rumor and for a long time he could not understand clearly what had happened.

A tribe of Eskimos hunting south had met some coast Indians who had been trading, at Christmas, at Fort George in James Bay. The Crees had tried to explain to the Huskies what the Missionaries and White Traders had told them, but the peace-loving Eskimos could not realize what the word "war" meant. Furthermore, their knowledge of the Cree language was very confused. They told our man that there were a lot of dead people in the white man's land, far away over the sea; that the noise was terrible and that the white men's Igloos were all destroyed. They did not



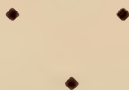
## *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH* • • •

---

mention the words—war, shell, gas—which the more civilized Indians knew from hearsay and had told to them. They just repeated what had struck their imagination. In other words, what they had understood.

The trader pondered for months over that rumor. In the end he came to the conclusion that there had been a great earthquake somewhere in Europe, like the one in California in 1906, and dismissed the matter from his mind. He never thought of war.

It was in summer, when the supply ship reached his Post, that he learned what had really happened. He left at once to join the French Army and was killed a year later at Verdun.



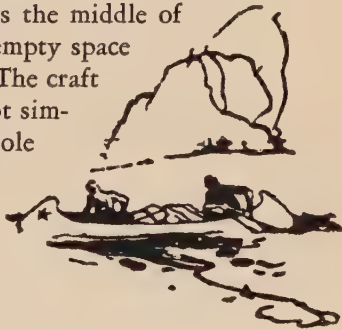
## Tale VIII:

### *A Birch Bark Canoe*

A CANOE, MAY SHE BE A 16-FOOT CRUISER or a 22-foot freighter, is at all times a small craft, especially on a lake when the nearest shore happens to be a very long distance off.

Men who live in the far North pass all their time on the water as soon as the ice disappears in the spring. They are so accustomed to their cranky canoes that it never occurs to them to bother about what they should do if, by any chance, something unusual happens. But in case of emergency they think and act very quickly. I had an example of it a few years ago on Abitibi Lake.

Two Indians were freighting a heavy load of hardware in a birch bark canoe. They had a head wind and the waves were pretty high. The man at the bow thought the canoe was packed too much by the stern and shouted over his shoulder to the steersman to shift some of the load forward. The latter, from his seat in the stern, seized a 25-pound bag of shot at his feet and threw it five feet or so in front of him towards the middle of the canoe. The bag landed in an empty space right at the bottom of the canoe. The craft was old and rotten. The bag of shot simply broke the ribs, tore a gaping hole in the birch bark and disappeared straight down to the bottom of the lake.





## *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH* • • •

---

Instantly the water started pouring in. One mile from shore, a nasty sea running and a leak larger than a man's head which would fill and sink any canoe in a few minutes.

The steersman gave one yell and then jumped like a huge frog, landing in a sitting position right in the middle of that hole. He stuck there, shivering, with water to his waist, until the bowman, realizing the danger and paddling madly for shore, succeeded at last in beaching the canoe high and dry.



Tale IX:

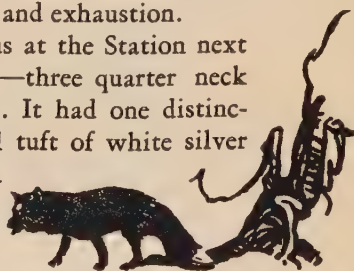
*A Silver Fox and a Scarf*

**I**N THE FAR NORTH, EVEN NOW IN THE DAYS of fox farming, a Silver Fox means a small fortune to the lucky trapper. Men will often risk their lives to bring an exceptionally fine pelt back to the trader.

Some years ago in the Ungava district, two Eskimos, brothers, caught a beautiful Silver Fox late in March. They decided to bring it back to the Post at once. They had not caught anything before that and were half starved. The men had to travel on the ice along the sea coast. In their anxiety to reach the trader, they cut across a bay during a blizzard. The Eskimo who was breaking the trail ahead of the dogs walked on some thin ice and fell through; team and sleigh following him into the gaping hole. Man and dogs drowned although the other Eskimo, who was behind them and had stopped in time, made every effort to save them.

The lone man who was carrying the the Silver Fox in a bag slung on his back kept on and managed to reach the Post, covering the last few miles literally on his hands and knees through sheer weakness and exhaustion.

The Silver Fox was shown to us at the Station next summer. It was a wonderful skin—three quarter neck fresh silvered, without a blemish. It had one distinctive and very rare mark—a small tuft of white silver hair on the center of the forehead slightly above the eyes.



## *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH* ♦ ♦ ♦

---

The Fox eventually reached our New York house and was sold during the winter. A few months later in a well known night restaurant, a lady with a party of friends got up from her table to leave. The waiter picked up and handed to her a Silver Fox scarf which had slipped from her chair and had been lying unnoticed on the floor under the table. It was the Ungava Fox with the little white mark between the eyes.



## Tale X:

### *Dead in the Storm*

IT WAS A BLEAK, DREARY, WIND-SWEPT morning in February. We had broken camp at the faint flush of dawn, after remaining helplessly caught for two days in our tent by a raging blizzard. It had ceased snowing and the thermometer was going down like a piece of lead. The snow, although hardening under the intense cold, was deep.

There was no trail. An Indian was struggling ahead of the dogs. Everywhere silence. Now and then a mass of snow would slide down noiselessly from the overhanging branch of a spruce tree. There was no sign of animal life. Not a track anywhere. Not even a bird on the wing in the sullen grey sky.

We were following a coulée between two high ridges thickly covered with trees. At a bend of the small valley the Indian, looking ahead, stopped dead. So did the team of Huskies.

A few hundred yards away we saw a lone dog, standing erect, keeping guard beside what looked like a mound covered with snow. The nearer we approached, the plainer we saw what it was. It was a sleigh with its load lashed on and, on the top, what seemed to us like a human body stretched



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

out, rigid under its white mantel. The dog traces were hanging loose. The harness had been chewed and broken. The team, tired of waiting, had escaped—going back somewhere to an unknown camp. Alone, the leader had chosen to remain beside the sleigh. He was weak from hunger but still faithful to his charge. He faced us squarely with his shaggy coat bristling, swaying slightly on his legs and snarling his deep, wolf snarl. When we heard it, we knew it was the death song of a dog who was defending the dead body of his master.

The Indian cautiously lassoed him and tied him up. He made a good fight for it but the snow was too deep and his strength was far gone. We gently brushed away the snow from the top of the sleigh and looked at the man. He was lying on his back, a smile on his white face, his light blue eyes staring far away into the sky. A stranger, a prospector from somewhere south, lost in the wilderness and at the end of his rations. Caught in the blizzard, too weak to pitch camp, frozen to death while his dogs wandered in the blinding storm.



*Tale XI:*

*A Strange Team*

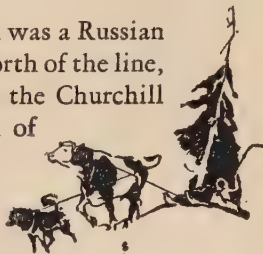
**N**ORTH OF 53, DURING THE WINTER, I have seen sleighs drawn by horses, mules, dogs of every breed and description and even men.

But once I saw the strangest outfit of all. We were sitting beside a fire on the bank of a river only a few miles from the railway line when we heard a yell and a strange noise which appeared to be a combination of a bellow and a howl.

We got up and, to our astonishment, we saw, racing up the river on the ice in a smother of snow, a small sleigh drawn by a large yellow dog and a very small red bull. The dog was in the lead, tied to the sleigh by at least twelve yards of rope. The bull, harnessed to the sleigh by two leather traces, with his head down and his tail in the air was charging full tilt at the dog who was scampering down the trail as fast as he could lay his four paws on the snow.

On the sleigh was a load of pressed hay and, on the top of it, clung a fat man with a bushy beard and a very white face. Before we could say a word, man, bull and dog vanished round a bend of the river.

Later on we found out that the man was a Russian squatter, living three hundred miles north of the line, who wanted to try to raise cattle on the Churchill River. The bull was the first animal of the prospective herd.





## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

As it was impossible for him to freight any cattle by canoe in summer, he had hit on the idea of taking the little bull up there in winter, on foot. The hay on the sleigh was to feed the poor animal on the trip.

The most remarkable part of this story is that, eventually, man, bull and dog reached their destination safely.

Throughout the first day, the bull made wild rushes at the dog who took great care to keep a distance between himself and his enemy. But after covering twenty miles or so, the little bull gave it up as a bad job and settled down. Very soon he became friendly with his new harness companion; both animals finally drawing the sleigh slowly and peacefully to the end of their journey.



Tale XII:

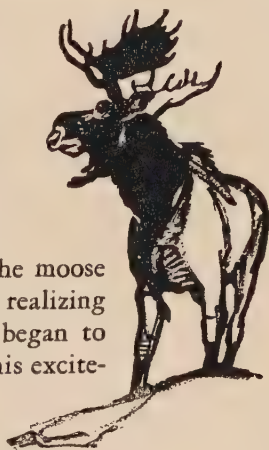
*A Moose Story*

**I**T NEVER PAYS TO TAKE ANY LIBERTIES WITH a wild animal when one believes that the latter is at one's mercy.

In 1908 two Indians, when crossing a large lake in Northern Ontario in a small canoe, came across a big bull moose swimming from an island to the mainland.

They needed the meat but preferred waiting until the animal was near land before shooting it. They accordingly decided to have some fun! The man at the bow found a rope, lassoed the moose by its antlers, then tied the other end of the rope to the front thwart. After that the two Indians squatted down at the bottom of the canoe, yelling sarcastic remarks to the poor wild-eyed animal which was towing them with the strength of a good sized tug.

When this strange outfit drew near the shore, the man in the bow picked up his rifle. It was an old, single barrel muzzle loader. He aimed carefully and pressed the trigger, but the weapon missed fire. Pulling up the hammer, he repeated the performance with the same result. Meanwhile, the moose was touching bottom. The Indian, realizing that the cap in his gun was wet, began to search frantically for a new one. In his excite-



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

ment he forgot to pull out his knife and cut the rope.

At the spot that bottom of the lake sloped up abruptly. Before the man could find a new cap, the moose was half-way up to his shoulders in the water. With an angry shake of the head and a loud snort, the enraged animal bounded forward. In a second the canoe upset, pitching men and freight into six feet of icy cold water.

When the two Indians came up to the surface, the first thing they saw was the stern of their canoe vanishing in the bush. That was also the last they ever saw of either moose or canoe.

Crestfallen, shivering and hungry, they reached  
the trading station one day later—  
sadder, wiser and on foot.



Tale XIII:

*The Little Blue Lake*

IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES OVER THE divide, where all vegetation dwindles down to nothing as one approaches the barren lands, I know a small lake nestling in the hollow of three hills.

The traveller reaches it on one side by a trail. On the other, a swift creek is the only outlet. Protected from the wind, the trees which surround it have grown to giant size. They stand closely packed right to the edge of the water.

The little lake with its circle of vegetation does not cover more than an acre. From the top of the hills, one peers down on it as on a small oasis lost in the desert.

Amidst the savage, grey boulders of the surrounding country, one looks lovingly on the splash of colour which strikes the eye. The dark green of the murmuring jack-pines; the sapphire blue of the still, icy waters.

A little later, when the canoe has been launched on the lake and has drifted towards the center, the traveller gazes over the side in amazement. The water is as pure as crystal and deep as a well. Far down at the bottom of the lake, countless springs are scattered everywhere among the rocks. Each spring sends a column of white, foaming water up towards the surface and each column of white foam spreads and dissolves itself into millions of bubbles which dance about—mounting, ever mounting—until they burst and become part of the sapphire blue of the lake itself.

## *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH* • • •

Few white men have been there—but those few cannot forget the beauty of the lonely spot. The Indians call it "The well with the White Smoke". In the company, we call it simply "The little blue lake".



## *Tale XIV:*

### *Forest Fires*

**F**OREST FIRES ARE THE SCOURGE OF THE wilderness. Certain years, in the late Spring or during the Summer, when the weather has been unusually dry, a mere spark may start a blazing tornado which will lay utter waste throughout thousands and thousands of acres of timber.

The carelessness of a trapper throwing a lighted match on the ground. The thoughtlessness of a traveller going to sleep or breaking camp without putting out his fire. Lightning striking a tree. An ordinary piece of glass lying on dry moss and catching the rays of the sun. Any of these is sufficient to kindle a fire which may burn fiercely for weeks, reaching the tops of the highest trees, smouldering underground amidst the roots and the muskeg, reaching over rivers and lakes, blazing its erratic way through the bush according to the changes of the wind.

In the solitude of the far North, where men are scattered a hundred miles from one another, no help can be secured to fight the red evil. Only heavy rain or a complete shift of wind, blowing the flames back over the already burnt area, may stop the scourge. Meanwhile all vegetation vanishes and wild animals die.

Beavers, Otters, Mink, Muskrats, that live in the water have a fair chance of escape, but nearly all the other wild folk fall victim to the deadly sheet of flames.

Foxes, Badgers, Coyotes, Ground Hogs, Chipmunks, Wolverines, Porcupines, take refuge in their holes under-



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

ground where the smoke, curling lazily down and down, eventually reaches them and smothers them with their young.

Lynx, Marten, Squirrels, Wild Cats, seek safety in the trees, hiding either in their holes or on the highest branch they can find until the flames find them in their lair, or the unbearable heat, scorching them, unloosens their mad grip and precipitates them into the furnace below.

Wolves, Bears, Caribou, Deer and Moose take to flight. But the great tragedy is that, in this season, all animals have their young. The little ones get exhausted in the mad scramble through dense bush and stifling smoke. They cannot keep pace with the flames. Little by little they fall back. Then the parents return to them and remain at their side until it is too late.

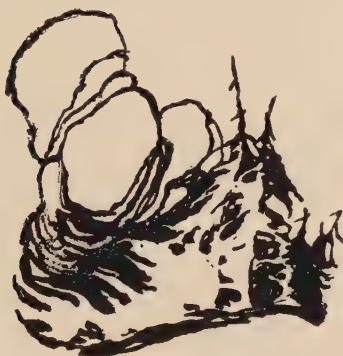
A few animals, through sheer luck or by keeping their wits, manage to escape. Now and then one may find on a sandy point, reaching far out in a lake, a motley crowd of animals of all breeds, huddled together on the edge of the water or in the water itself. Perfectly indifferent to one another, their only thought is to keep away from the flames. The nearer the latter comes, the further the animals crawl and the deeper they crouch in the water.

In such cases it is a common occurrence to see a dozen rabbits sitting solemnly in the water, their heads alone showing. A little further out, two bear cubs may be grovelling on their bellies like two children at play on the seashore. While the mother swims about angrily, taking no notice of a cow-moose and her calf, both motionless in the water. . . . the little one standing, the mother lying down, their shoulders completely covered.

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

---

A little to one side a Red Fox, a Vixen, has carried her young, one by one, to the edge of the lake. The pups are too young yet to have sense to crawl in. So the mother has dropped them in the water and, crouching between them and the shore, keeps them huddled, whimpering and frightened, safe from the heat and the sparks





Tale XV:

*An Indian Wake*



ONE EVENING A FEW YEARS AGO, I was sitting alone at a small trading station on the edge of a lake in north Saskatchewan. A Northeast wind was blowing and the grey water was lashed into angry white caps that raced madly one after the other.

I was watching an 18-foot canvas canoe manned by two Indians who were paddling straight for me. They were having a hard time in making the shore and seemed worried by the load they were freighting.

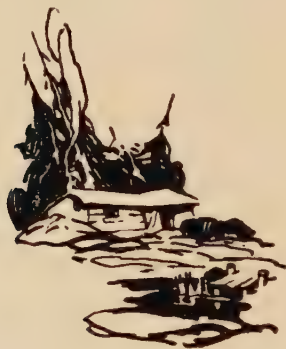
From where I sat I could not make out what sort of cargo they carried, but I could see that it was placed amidship and stuck out on each side well over the gunwales. I thought at first it was a log, although I was at a loss to understand why they had not placed it lengthwise under the thwarts. I finally realized, with a certain amount of astonishment, that the two men were freighting in a large coffin, the weight and the dimensions of which prevented them placing it anywhere else than above deck, so to speak, and crosswise.

I sauntered down to the beach and gave them a hand in unloading their burden. They told me that it was their father who had died a considerable time ago and they were absolutely obliged to bury him as soon as possible. Being Catholics, they had to bring the body for burial to the priest whom the bad weather had kept on his side of the lake.

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

An hour or so later I heard the screech of a violin. Going out to investigate, I found my two Indians in a shack close by, receiving visitors from the neighborhood and whiling away the time by an impromptu dance. Meanwhile, the coffin had been dragged outside to make more room. It lay, grim and dark, on the right side of the door along the wall of the cabin. All the dogs of the village, one by one, their tails curled up and their ears pointed, were passing in front of it in a solemn procession. I watched them from a distance. Each dog stopped—sniffed at one corner of the coffin, went to the other—sniffed again and then, slowly and religiously, cocked up one hind leg and remained there, motionless for a few seconds.

Meanwhile the wind wailed across the lake as if striving to drown the whining of the fiddle.



Tale XVI:  
*A Walrus Story*

WHEN MEN HAVE NO KNOWLEDGE whatsoever of the danger they run, they are liable to do the most foolhardy thing imaginable and come out of it safely—to the utter astonishment of all old timers.

Here is a striking example of that, which happened a few years ago:

We were forging ahead through the ice of Hudson Straits on an auxiliary schooner. There were on board a lot of "husky" dogs which we were transferring from one trading station to another.

One morning the man in the crow's nest saw a small herd of walrus asleep on the ice. Creeping up slowly, we got up to a hundred yards from them before they took any notice of the ship.

The meat was needed for the dogs. Firing a volley, we killed two of the huge animals outright. The rest of the herd dived and scattered. Manoeuvring alongside the pan, we put one man of the crew overboard to rope the carcasses to be hoisted on deck with the winch.

It happened that the sailor who went over the side was an Italian who had never been in the North. He was very





keen and excited. While he was busy tying a rope round each animal's head under the tusks, a big bull walrus, which had probably been wounded in the body a few minutes before, suddenly came up to the surface beside the pan. With one heave, the enormous animal jumped clean out of the water to the ice a few feet from the sailor whose back was turned. Everyone on board was terrified. Nobody dared to shoot for fear of hitting the man.

The walrus shook his head and seemed ready to plunge his tusks right in the middle of the man's back. He weighed over fifteen hundred pounds.

Feeling the animal's breath on him, the Italian turned round. "Get out of here, you ugly thing!" he shouted in his own language, and with that he slapped him right across the jaw with the back of his hand. The walrus gave a grunt, slid backwards over the edge of the pan and vanished in the depths of the sea.

The sailor calmly turned back to his job, while on board we breathed a prayer of thankfulness.



Tale XVII:

*Mohican . . . The Wolf*

**M**OHICAN WAS A LARGE TIMBER wolf, grown wise through years of bitter experience in the Canadian North.

During the winter he probably roamed through the wilderness as the head of his own pack seeking the caribou. But each spring he would come back to the country of small lakes near the Eastern shores of Hudson Bay, where he ranged until fall in complete solitude.

Mohican was known to many Indians who recognized his enormous tracks on all the little sandy beaches of the lakes. But no one bothered him until, one day, he developed a keen taste for white fish and started breaking all rules by interfering with the red men.

In some way or other, the lone wolf had discovered that nets were made to catch fish. After that, for many weeks, each time he felt like it, he would search along the banks until he found the stake of a net. Then he would take to the water and swim to the net itself. Poking his head under the water he would choose the best looking white fish, leaving severely alone suckers, pickerel and such small fry, tear his prey out of the mesh, bring it back to shore and eat it at his leisure. So far, so good. Little harm was done.



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

But Mohican was intensely practical and like all wild animals, believed in simplifying matters as much as he could. One day he hit on the plan of dragging the net to the bank instead of swimming out to it. He therefore caught in his jaw the stout rope where it was tied to the stake. Then, proceeding backwards slowly but surely, pulled the whole net clean out of the water to the shore where he ate what he liked, leaving the rest of the catch to die and spoil in the sun.

From that day on, he pulled at all the nets which he found and his strength was enormous. Few stakes, however deeply they were driven in the mud, could resist the strain and prevent him doing all the mischief he wished.

Poor old Mohican! His cunning and intelligence were great, but he had committed the unpardonable sin of robbing the red man of his food. One day at dawn he was seen by an Indian.

The lone, old wolf was sitting on his haunches, tugging hard at the net's rope.

The rifle cracked from behind a spruce tree, but Mohican never knew what hit him. He had to pay the price of his sin. Such is the law of the wilderness.

It was a long shot, a pretty shot so far as that  
goes—four hundred yards—right across  
a small bay of the lake.

♦ ♦

♦

*Tale XVIII:*

*Fighting Against Starvation*

**I**N THE DEAD OF WINTER A FEW YEARS AGO, two Eskimo women, mother and daughter, were starving in their Igloo on the shores of Baffin Land. The rest of the tribe had gone inland searching for caribou. The older woman, who was lame, had been left behind with her daughter to look after her. They had been provided with a supply of food but the hunters were late in coming back and it had dwindled, little by little, to nothing. In the end the two women had killed and eaten the only dog that had remained with them. They were now helpless, waiting for death, without food of any sort, without fishing tackle and without firearms.

The third day after they had eaten their last scrap of dog meat, the younger woman caught sight of a large seal which was lying on the ice, parallel to the shore about two miles off. The floe had moved a little. Long lanes of clear water had opened up enabling the seal to climb out. It was resting with its head on the edge of the pan ready to dive at the first sign of danger.

To the starving women the seal, weighing four hundred pounds, meant food and life. Their only weapons were a knife and a hatchet. The daughter decided to stalk the seal while the mother, holding the hatchet, squatted on the beach and watched.

To that effect the younger woman, knife in hand, walked along the beach for about three miles. After that,

certain to be far enough behind the quarry not to be seen, she walked out on the ice the same distance as it was from shore. Having reached that point, she began stalking the seal in earnest.

It lay with its hind flippers towards her, but every minute or so it would raise its head for a few seconds to scan the horizon. Then the woman, crawling on her hands and knees, would have to remain motionless, lying flat on the ice. Little by little she crept nearer, using every small pinnacle, every little ridge and rough edge of the pans as a shield.

She was already weak from hunger. The constant strain began to tell on her. The nearer she crawled to the animal, the longer she had to rest and regain her breath. Seals have good ears. The slightest sound of panting would have driven the animal head first into the water.

It took her all day to cover the two miles. During all that time she was in agony at the thought that the seal, tired of dozing, would dive into the sea again before she could reach it. Still, she could not take the risk of hurrying.

Finally, only four feet separated her from the quarry. With the superb self control of the savage she waited several minutes, then, when the seal lowered its head again on the pan, she sprung at it, driving her knife clear through the hind flippers deep into the ice.

With the whole weight of her body thrown on the handle she remained there, pinning the huge animal on the floe. As long as the knife held, the seal, head and shoulders over the edge, could not dive. The infuriated animal tried to turn around and baring its cruel fangs, snapped at her. Its bulk was so huge that the yellow teeth

• • • *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH*

---

just failed to reach her face.

For an hour the woman and the beast strained against one another. Meanwhile the mother, who had been keeping watch on the shore, was hobbling over the ice towards them in a frenzy of excitement. She knew that her daughter's strength would have to give way sooner or later and that the time had now come for her to hasten to the rescue.

Screaming shrilly, scrambling from pan to pan, she covered the distance as fast as she could in spite of her lameness. When she reached the seal she attacked it fearlessly. With a few shrewd blows of her hatchet on the head she dropped it dead in its tracks. Just in time, for her daughter's hands, bleeding and frozen, were already slipping on the knife's handle and relaxing their hold.







Tale XIX:

*Wild Animals in the Water*

**F**EW PERSONS KNOW HOW MUCH WATER there is in northern Canada. Even fewer people realize what enormous distances all animals have to swim in quest of food or to escape from danger.

Moose and Caribou will not hesitate to cross lakes several miles wide, and for no apparent reason but to change from one feeding ground to another. I have often seen them swim over four miles in the bitterest cold weather in the early Spring or late in the fall when the snow was on the ground and the temperature at freezing point.

Black Bears will swim for miles; young cubs barely four months old keeping up with their mothers.

Lynx, although hating water like all the cat tribe, will cross the widest river when migrating.

Small animals, such as porcupines and squirrels, are often found swimming a mile or so from shore.

Two years ago when paddling down the Churchill River, we found a fat old porcupine leisurely crossing the river where it was over a mile wide. He was then about eight hundred yards from where he wanted to land and his speed



## *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH* • • •

must have averaged one mile per hour. He took absolutely no notice of us. At each stroke of his short foreleg he grunted loudly. Now and then he would lift his quills and shake them so as to get some of the weight of the water off his back.

Squirrels, I have noticed, always swim with the wind in their backs and invariably carry their tails straight up in the air out of the water. The Indians maintain that they only take to water when the wind is favorable as they know that their tail, acting like a sail, will help them along.

White Bears, of course, are the best swimmers of all the non-amphibious mammals. They can swim for a whole day, resting now and then on their backs like sleeping seals.

In 1908, we saw a white bear yearling cub swimming towards shore at least fifteen miles out from Cape Churchill in Hudson Bay. The nearest ice was then forty-five miles from the spot where we found him. There was absolutely no doubt that our bear had undertaken a sixty-mile swim to reach land.



Tale XX:

*"Sunday"*

THE EASTERN HAIR SEALS ROAM BETWEEN the coasts of Newfoundland and Greenland. Unlike the fur seals of the Pacific, they are valuable only for their fat and the leather of their pelts. The best oil is obtained from the young pups which are born on the ice in February.

Young seals do not know how to swim at birth and the hardy fishermen of Newfoundland hunt them before they have taken to the water.

Every day of the week the crew of each vessel leaves its ship and on foot, through fog and blizzards, scours the bleak wilderness of the ice floes. But the hunt stops on Sunday—even if the vessels happen to be in the midst of thousands of seals. From Saturday midnight to Monday one o'clock, all the men remain idle.

One Sunday morning in March, 1908, I was on board a sealer. I happened to look over the side and saw a young seal sound asleep on the ice a few hundred yards from the ship. With the idea of taking it on board so as to photograph it on deck, I slipped over the side. Walking up to the pup I caught it by the hind flippers, swung it over my shoulder and started carrying it to the vessel. Although I followed my footsteps on the ice, I suddenly broke through and found myself plunged into the bitterly cold water. The little seal followed me in my downfall.

We both came up to the surface at the same time, with

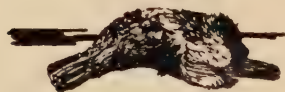
## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

only one idea in our heads—to get out as quickly as possible. I tried hard to climb out on the ice. So did the pup. The hole in which we were floundering was very small. The young seal floated like an empty bottle, his body half out of the water. In his efforts to get a hold on the edge of the pan, he flapped his front flippers like a pair of fans. Each flipper was armed with five claws as hard as steel.

My face got in the way of one flipper and instantly I came to the conclusion that I had better wait until my companion got out first.

Patiently and courteously I waited until the little pup, with a lot of snorting and splashing, slowly but stubbornly wriggled himself out of the water. When my turn came I was half dead with cold, and barely managed to pull myself on the ice in safety. Leaving the seal where he was, I tottered back to the ship.

I found the skipper very unsympathetic. The only thing he had to say was: "Serves you right. This is Sunday."



## Tale XXI:

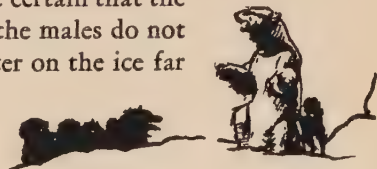
### *Filming a White Bear on Land*

**D**URING THE FILMING OF "NANOOK of the North", in the winter of 1921, we decided to take a scene of a white bear hunt at close quarters on land.

In a genuine film like ours, where one must take "close ups" of wild animals, the difficulty lies not only in approaching them sufficiently near so as not to have to use telescopic lens, but also in keeping the animals more or less on the same spot in front of the camera. Consequently, after studying the matter carefully, we concluded that the only way we could film the white bear hunt was to find in the early spring a "she" bear with cubs in her den.

The idea was that the bear would refuse to leave her young, would make a stand right away and give battle on the spot, thereby allowing the cameraman to crank away to his heart's content. We sent, accordingly, a few Eskimos to scour the country. After a few weeks they reported having found a bear asleep in a snow bank under a cliff on the seashore, about seventy-five miles north from where we were. We were certain that the animal was a "she" bear, as the males do not hibernate but roam all winter on the ice far out to sea.

We made the trip at once with six Eskimos, three





## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

sleighs and twenty-two dogs, and built our Igloos two miles away from where the bear had been found. Then we went out on foot to reconnoiter.

We found the bear's den easily. A large yellow spot on the snow, from which rose a slight vapor coming from the animal's breath, plainly showed that someone was at home. We carefully chose the best spot to place our one and only camera and rehearsed the whole scene. One Eskimo was to climb above the den and rouse the bear with a long pole. The others standing in front of the den were to let the dogs go as soon as the brute appeared. We knew that the Huskies would surround the bear; and we had no doubt that she would immediately make a stand in front of her cubs and fight.

We had to wait after that for three days until the weather was clear and fine. In the end the hour came. At first, everything went off beautifully. The bear was roused out of her lair by a few vigorous pokes of the pole but, instead of showing her head out of the snow and then emerging to give battle, she burst out of her den like a rabbit from its hold. It was a "she" bear all right, but it happened that she had no cubs.

In a flash she was through the pack of dogs and away! Before the cameraman could start cranking she was already fifty yards off, racing for the sea with all the huskies after her. We tried to lift the camera, carry it and follow, but it was useless. The bear never stopped for at least a mile. After that, when it was much too late, she turned around, fought the dogs for a few minutes—scattering them easily—then went on her way and disappeared finally over the icy horizon. We never found another bear in her den that year.

♦ ♦ ♦ *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH*

---

Such was the way Mr. R. J. Flaherty missed the  
only scene from "Nanook of the North".

♦ ♦

♦



Tale XXII:

*Vermin and Ants*

ALEX IS A DOGGONED FOOL." . . . THE speaker, a middle-aged Yankee trapper, spat thoughtfully on the red hot stove, then gazed inquiringly at his audience.

We were four, in a log cabin on the banks of the Churchill River. It was night—late in the fall—and already cold. Inside, the atmosphere was oppressive, reeking with tobacco smoke, sweat, fish scales, and grease. Outside, the wind blew in great, uneven gusts and the shack creaked like the timbers of a labouring ship at sea.

I finally inquired why Alex was a fool, and promptly heard the following story:

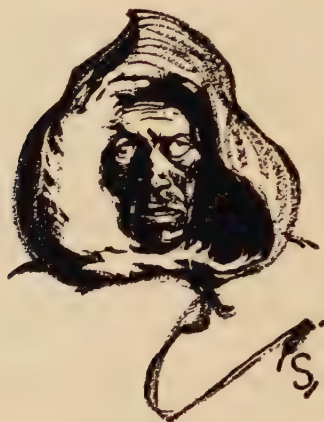
"One evening last June, Alex blew in with a couple of Chipewayan Indians. He had a load of fur in his canoe and was hurrying to the line to sell it and get drunk. Alex wanted me to lend him a shirt. He was as vermin ridden as a pet coon, and said he didn't have time to wash his shirt. I had only one shirt, a clean one I had only worn a few times, and I was thinking of using it myself when I moved south. So I said "no", and advised him to take his shirt off and lay it on an ant heap. Alex didn't like the idea, but I told him the ants would clean up every insect. He did what I said.

"When the time came to leave, there was a fair wind down the stretch so they put up a sail in a hurry. Alex grabbed his shirt and they left.

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

---

"I saw Alex again last week. He said when he put on his shirt the vermin were gone, but he forgot to shake it first and the ants were still there! You know the kind, boys! The little red ones! And they sure did bite like the devil before he could strip again!"



Tale XXIII:

*A Greenhorn in a Rapid*

EVERY SPRING, A LOT OF GREENHORNS go North, either in hope of making their living, or in a spirit of adventure. A few struggle through and succeed. A lot meet with accidents. All of them run appalling risks.

Some years ago—before the War—there was a mild stampede on the Chamuchuan River in the Province of Quebec. Gold was reported to have been found. As soon as the ice had gone, several hundred men started North, plunging into the wilderness in quest of fortune.

A few weeks later we were poling up that same river on our way to Mistassini Lake. We reached a long straight rapid and were unloading our canoe before portaging. One of the Indians noticed, two miles away at the head of the rapid, right in the middle of the foaming river, a dark speck on a flat rock. One man said it was a bear because it moved.

What a black bear could be doing in such a spot was a problem in itself, as I happened to be the first one over the portage. I looked instinctively at the river. There was a man squatting dismally on a small flat rock right in the middle of the current, fifty yards or so below where the portage stopped and the rapid began.

So that was the black bear seen an hour ago! When the stranger saw us, he scrambled to his feet and started gesticulating wildly. We could not understand how he got there. He had no canoe. The rock was about three foot



## *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •*

square. On both sides of it the river rushed down in a blind torrent of foam.

We considered a way to rescue him. The idea of running down in a canoe was out of the question. Even if we succeeded in getting him on board—we would have to go on and there was a ten foot fall a few hundred yards further down which meant immediate disaster.

We hit on the following plan. We found a good sized log, tied to it all the ropes we had in one single line, paddled as far down near the head of the rapid as we dared, anchored our canoe with a huge stone taken from shore and then paid out the rope, the log floating ahead of it towards the man on the rock.

We managed to let the log pass more or less alongside the stranger! But for a long time the man appeared frightened. Each time he missed his chance of catching hold of the log. And we had to hand it up again thirty yards or so to be able to give it the proper direction so that it would pass as near as possible to the rock.

Finally, the stranger decided to take a chance. He waved at us as if he were taking a last farewell, then, jumped boldly—head first and arm extended—straight for that log. There was quite a splash and for a second we could not see whether he had succeeded in getting hold of the stump. Our rope was tight. We had reached the end of it.

We hauled in. In a few minutes we knew we had our man at the end of our line. We got occasional glimpses of him, although he was all the time half way under water. He was lying on the log—clasping it with both arms—straddling it with both legs. Little by little we got him alongside. He was nearly drowned and quite

• • • *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH*

speechless. With an effort we got him on board. Then letting the log go after cutting the rope—we paddled ashore.

An hour later our new acquaintance was able to talk and tell us his story. He was a student of McGill University and had gone with a party to the upper end of the river in search of gold. Disgusted with the life, homesick, weak from lack of food and from mosquito bites, he had decided to run away and reach the line. Stealing a canoe, he had started alone on his journey.

He had never been in the woods before. When he reached the rapid he missed the portage. In a second he found himself helpless in the first whirlpool. By sheer luck his canoe was thrown against that lonely flat rock. When it hit, he let his paddle go and jumped, landing safely on the big stone. The canoe, of course, disappeared in the swirl.

He had been there—squatting helplessly right in the middle of that rapid—for thirty-six hours





## Tale XXIV:

### *Large Fish*

WHEN AND WHEREVER A MAN tells a fishing story, there is a deep-rooted feeling among everyone listening that the man is far from being truthful. That is a handicap for any one trying to describe how large fish do run in Canada north of 53. Nevertheless the fact remains that in Labrador as well as in the West, Pickerel, Muskellunge and Lake Trout grow to enormous size.

Three years ago on South Reindeer Lake, in a net placed under the ice, our men caught a trout which tipped the beam at fifty-three pounds. In the same lake, when trolling the following July, we caught one weighing thirty-five pounds. We showed it to an Indian camped near by.

He told us that a few days before he had netted one much larger, which he had given to his dogs to eat.

To prove the truth of his statement he hunted around the bush, found the trout's head and brought it to us. We measured it with the head of our own fish. It was, more or less, twice as large.

Muskellunge and Pickerel up to forty pounds are common in the big lakes. Some are bigger. These fish, when hungry, are vicious and often go for quarry which they can hardly swallow.

A squirrel swimming across a river is snapped up like a minnow. So are young ducklings, if they venture too far out from shore. In several instances we have seen a much

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

larger bird successfully pulled down by a big pickerel.

Last, summer when paddling near a small island on Bear Lake, we noticed three young gulls take fright, leave their nest on the rocks, and swim directly away from us. They were full grown, although they had not yet learned how to fly.

One of those gulls was pulled down three times in front of us by a pickerel. Each time it remained under water almost a minute. The fish finally gave it up as a bad job; but we marvelled at the endurance of that young bird. It did not seem the worse for its submarine encounter.



Tale XXV:

*A Little Indian Girl*

**R**AILWAYS MAY EXTEND THEIR LINES FAR away in the north; civilization may wipe out huge slices of wilderness; the remaining Indians, in spite of all their faults intensified by the contact with white men, are still at heart wild men whose sole aim in life is to hunt and to kill.

Whatever may be their calling, there is one thing which no Indian man, woman, or child can resist. It's to try to lay low big game. In other words, to try to secure red meat each time the occasion arises.

Last summer, near where we were camped, a very old squaw took her granddaughter, aged ten, to look over her nets. The child was in the bow of the canoe. Suddenly they came across a big bull moose swimming the river. They had no rifle and there was no time to return to camp to fetch one. The old woman did not hesitate. With one sweep of her paddle she steered the small canoe straight for the moose, while she screamed to the little girl to pick up the small axe which they were using to drive in the stakes of their nets.

The child was frightened but she answered the call of the blood. She seized the axe and, when her grandmother fearlessly paddled the canoe alongside the huge horns of the moose, she struck with all her might. She was too young to know how to use her small weapon. Instead of



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

aiming between the animal's ears with the head of the axe, she struck blindly with the blade. She missed several times, wounding the big moose in the neck.

The infuriated animal roared, shook his head, lunged out with his front paws, narrowly missing the canoe. The little girl kept on savagely. Finally, she buried her axe in the bull's huge back. She did not have the strength to wrench it out. The moose reached the shore, staggered up the bank and disappeared in the bush. . . . We found it an hour later, dead, a few hundred yards away.

There was a silent but proud little Indian girl in camp that night.

The bull moose must have weighed over twelve hundred pounds, while the axe measured exactly three feet long.



Tale XXVI:

*Outlawed in the Barren Lands*

**T**HE BARREN LANDS. . . . FAR AWAY, north of the trees. Windswept, rock strewn, colorless. An undulating desert with huge boulders, grey moss, little patches of scrub willows nestling in the hollows of the hills. Thousands of small streams and lakes.

Far away on the edge of the Arctic. Bleaker than the northern moors of Scotland shorn of their native heather. The feeding ground of the wandering herds of caribou. The nestling place of all water fowl.

Far away, skirting the frozen seas. A land of waste lying on the top of the world. Scarred and twisted by some gigantic earthquake hundreds of centuries ago. Blasted eternally by the icy breath of the pole.

The Barren Lands. The last refuge for the criminal unmercifully tracked by the law. Northward—ever northward—the man has fled from civilization. Downstream—ever downstream—he has paddled madly through the forest, seeking safety in the unknown. Leaving the trees behind him he has at last reached his goal. The Barren Lands.

But fear urges him on. He leaves his useless canoe and blindly stag-



## *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH* • • •

gers north on foot. North, north, into the heart of the land of waste from which there is no outlet. The weaker he gets the more he longs to go further. His food is nearly gone. On the top of the hills he scans the horizon. South, the line of trees has disappeared. North, nothing but the rolling desert of moss and rock.

On and on he staggers for days. He is starving now, although he is able to quench his thirst at the small icy creeks which wind their way towards the sea.

It is night. The man suddenly hears a dull moaning sound, the everlasting breaking of the surf against the shore. He has reached the end of the Barren Lands. He finds himself staggering down a rocky beach. His eyes are staring ahead of him. Nothing but a grey, unlimited ocean, dotted with icebergs.

For the first time he realizes the hopelessness of his flight. He remains a few seconds swaying on his feet. Then his brain gives way. With a scream, he tosses his hands above his head and, lurching forward, falls dead, his face in the foam of the waves.

High up in the sky, over Barren Lands and Arctic Ocean, the Northern lights reel, twist, and swirl, in their eternal dance of madness.



*Tale XXVII:*

*One Thousand Years*

**N**OW AND THEN IN THE FAR NORTH, a trader adopts an Eskimo boy, always an orphan, and brings him up at the Station. When the boy reaches manhood he generally remains at the Post, acting as a general servant and interpreter. While his usefulness as a "jack of all trades" is great, his efficiency in English is invariably poor. No pure Eskimo can understand and speak fluently any other language but his own, and, although he is quite capable of remembering hundreds of foreign words, he has a very hazy notion of what these words really mean.

I remember well a certain Post servant called "Nero". No one knew how he got that strange name. He was about sixty years old and thought himself head and shoulders above any other native in the country. Wise to the ways of white men, the equal of any other Eskimo in traveling and hunting, he was a well known character within a radius of five hundred miles.

One summer I was traveling with him along the eastern coast of Hudson Bay. The weather was clear and we were sailing in a little schooner a few hundred yards off shore.

Everywhere, Eskimos have a habit of erecting cairns of rocks on all the cliffs and high spots so as to have land marks when traveling in winter, especially during stormy weather.

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

I happened to notice one of those cairns which was of unusual size. The rocks, which had been piled very neatly and carefully one on top of the other, were enormous. It must have taken several men quite a few days of labor to put it up.

I called Nero's attention to the cairn, and added that it looked very old and I wondered how long it had been there. Nero, never at a loss for an answer, nodded cheerfully and replied "Yes, much old—thousand years." I grinned and remarked, "How do you know it has been there so long?" Nero hesitated a few seconds then retorted brightly, "Yes, thousand years. I know. It was here when I a little boy. I saw her, thousand years."

After that answer, I gave it up and changed the subject of conversation.



Tale XXVIII:

*A Practical Joke*

INDIANS HAVE THE REPUTATION OF BEING always of a serious turn of mind. My experience is to the contrary. They talk incessantly, laugh at any joke and love to play tricks on each other.

One night on Isle a la Crosse Lake, we had pitched camp near the tepee of a Chipewyan family. The weather was beautiful, the mosquitoes were gone—there was not a cloud in the sky.

The father, an old Indian with long, grey hair, decided to sleep in the open. He rolled himself up in his blanket in the bottom of his canoe and was soon asleep—snoring peacefully under a full moon, millions of stars and the shimmer of the northern lights low down on the horizon.

As soon as my two Indians saw that, they crept to the lake, filled a large kettle full of water, returned noiselessly and poured the contents of the kettle very gently in the canoe. Three times they did that without waking the sleeper. Then they hid in the bush and waited.

In a few minutes the old man grunted, shifted, turned round again, and then sat up hurriedly. First, he felt the bottom of the canoe with both hands and discovered several inches of water that had soaked through his blankets





## *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH* • • •

and clothes. After that, he looked up towards the sky. He searched silently for clouds and signs of rain. The moon was still there—as brilliant as ever. So were the stars! He got out of the canoe, felt himself fall over again, bent down a second time to feel the water then walking away a few paces he gazed long and searchingly above him and turned around so as to inspect thoroughly the four points of the compass.

That was too much for the two Indians hiding in the bush. One started to grunt, the other to groan. In a second the old man understood the joke and burst out laughing, slapping his wet thighs with his two bony hands.

Two hours later the three men were squatting in front of a fire, drinking tea and talking. Every now and again

I would hear a peal of laughter. They were still making merry over the joke.



Tale XXIX:

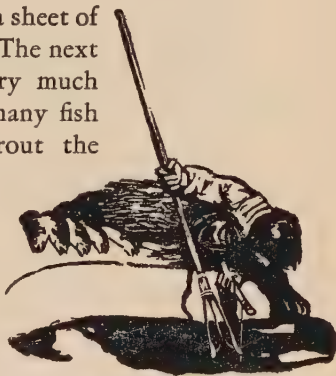
*Eskimo Arithmetic*

**F**AR AWAY IN THE SUB-ARCTIC, THE sturdy Eskimos live happily—hunting and fishing for food, trapping for furs to trade for clothing, ammunition and for such luxuries as tea, sugar tobacco and jam. They speak only their own language, and their idea of quantities or numbers is always very hazy. Some tribes do not seem to be able to count even ten. But their remarkable intelligence offsets this weakness.

One year I told an Eskimo, who hunted two hundred miles north of one of our stations, to report to me, the next summer, how many sea trout he had caught that Spring at the mouth of a certain river where we thought of establishing an outpost.

The native borrowed a pencil and a sheet of paper from the trader and departed. The next year he brought in the paper, very much soiled, but showing exactly how many fish he had killed—1132. For each trout the Eskimo had drawn a line, varying in length according to the size of the fish, and for each ten trout he had scrawled a double line. Nobody had ever taught him that.

Another instance of mathematics was reported to me in



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

the Northwest two years ago. At a certain post, we were using an Eskimo to trade with a far away tribe which we could not get in touch with otherwise. In the fall our trader would put on the man's sleigh so many articles, telling him how many articles he ought to give out for each skin. The next spring the man would return and faithfully turn over the furs with the balance of the untraded goods. There never was a mistake. But each year later, our trader noticed that the Eskimo brought back a bundle of furs of his own which he would trade with us afterwards, and for which it was difficult to account as the balance of the merchandise returned was correct and the native himself was not supposed to trap.

The trader finally asked him how it happened, and the Husky's answer plainly proved that he had found out by himself the secret of division. For instance, each article, that ought to have been given out for fur, the Eskimo cut in two; keeping one half for himself so as to trade it later on against fur on his own account.

Thus our native friend would trade one-half a pound of sugar instead of a whole one; half a stick of tobacco, and so on. He went so far as filing an ordinary file in two, trading one-half for us and the other for himself.

When our trader told him that he was not very fair to his northern brothers, he laughed and answered, "They have not learned how to count. I have."

• •

♦

Tale XXX:

*"Caribou"*

IN THE NORTHWEST OF CANADA, FAR AWAY from civilization, there still exist huge herds of caribou that roam by tens of thousands. In summer, they are to be found on the barren lands; in winter, through the wooded wilderness around South Reindeer Lake.

The main body of the herd seems to follow a steady routine of migration.

Each year the natives know exactly where to find it. The Eskimos follow the caribou during the summer. The Chippewayans lie in wait for them on their way south in the early fall. From then on until Spring those Indians live on the herd, using the meat for food and the leather for clothing.

At all times during the year, the grey timber wolves hover around, cutting out and pulling down the young, the maimed, and the weak. Still, the caribou ranks never seem to dwindle. In countless numbers each year they move north or south, according to the season, obeying the law of their kind.

In winter, when one travels through that enormous country which lies between Cree Lake and Pakatawagan, through Beark Lake, Wollaston Lake, further north to Nueltin Lake, further southeast to South Reindeer Lake, one is liable to meet, any day, hundreds and hundreds of these deer. In the depth of the bush one seldom sees them. But they seem to have a fondness for lakes, over the ice of

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

which they roam aimlessly, in the open, milling like sheep at the slightest sign of danger.

All men who travel in those regions depend on these deer for food, not only for themselves but for their dogs. Each team of "huskies" is wise to what a herd of caribou means as soon as it is sighted. When the traveller reaches a lake and sees the deer far away on the ice, the dogs realize what is going to happen, and strain silently and excitedly in their traces. The deer, foolishly, look around, run about, stop and stare. Little by little, the sleigh drawn by the straining dogs gets nearer and nearer.

Finally the man with one short word stops the team, then steps out of the sleigh, aims and fires. Instantly the dogs are off, baying like maniacs. The man makes a flying leap, grabs the sleigh and scrambles on board. The seven dogs are racing madly towards the deer who are running around in circles.

If the man's aim has been true, in a few minutes the team of "huskies" has reached its prey and, in a mad leap, is worrying its throat.

If he has missed, the man calls out a second time.

The dogs stop dead and the rifle barks again.



## Tale XXXI:

### *In Siberia*

**I**N PRE-WAR DAYS IN SIBERIA, TRAVELING ON the railway was easy; but as soon as one left it, one was liable to meet with a certain amount of adventures.

One night in the middle of winter, I landed at the station of Omsk. No one was there to meet me and I did not know a word of Russian. I was told that the town was at least six miles away and that to reach it one had to travel through a wild, empty country of rolling plain and small bush. Furthermore, quite a few Russians in Moscow and on the train had entertained me in French with terrible stories of escaped convicts, brigands, hold-ups and murders. In fact, only that week before my arrival, a traveler was supposed to have been shot and robbed on the same road that I had to take to go to town.

After a lot of trouble, I found a "troika" drawn by the usual three horses and was able to make the driver understand where I wanted to go.

I snuggled down under the fur robes and pulled out a revolver which I kept in my hand ready for any emergency. We started slowly through very bad roads. The cold was intense. In a little while, just as I was thinking that I had never seen such a beautifully lonely country to commit wholesale





## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

murder in, we heard a shout ahead of us. At that time we were half way up a small hill and, on the top of it hardly one hundred yards from us, plainly visible on the sky line, was a man on horseback. I could distinguish his big shaggy fur cap and a rifle which he held in his right hand with the stock resting on his thigh, the barrel sticking up.

In a flash I thought of the Russians' stories which I had disbelieved. I was being held up after all. I jerked out my gun from under the furs. I was desperate and had made up my mind to shoot first, trusting to luck. Just then the solitary cavalier shouted something in Russian, which, of course, I did not understand. My driver, with a yell to his horses, swung them frantically to the right and, in a second, the sleigh was in the deep snow out of the trail, half turned over on its side in a ditch. I clutched the sides so as not to be pitched out. At the same moment a tornado seemed to be upon us. I vaguely realized in the darkness that there were wild looking men on horseback. Some had drawn swords, others lances. There must have been one hundred of them. But instead of stopping—they swept downhill, past us, in a mad gallop. Before I could press the trigger everything was over. The road was empty, the night was silent and my driver was coaxing his horse back on the trail.

As soon as I reached Omsk I told our man, there, what had happened and asked for further information. "Why, that was his Imperial Majesty's mail going to the station to catch the midnight train for the east. It is always surrounded by a squadron of cavalry with one or two scouts ahead to clear the road."

My brigands were the regular Cossacks of the Czar.

• • • *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH*

To this day, I feel a cold shudder at the thought of  
what would have happened if I had fired my revolver in  
their midst. Talk of past murders on that lonely  
Siberian road! Picnics compared to what  
mine would have been!

♦ ♦

♦



*Tale XXXII:*

*In the Hudson Straits*

**W**IND - SWEPT, BLEAK AND RAGGED, savagely beautiful in their utter desolation, the mighty shores of Labrador tower over the racing tides of Hudson Straits.

Far out on the horizon a bank of mist hangs low, blending itself with the steel grey of the sea. Close by at the foot of the cliffs, a line of white foam everlastingly coils and uncoils itself, surging angrily against the glittering walls of granite.

In between, scattered over the grey waters, hundreds of icebergs are floating. In all shapes and sizes, these grim fragments of the eternal Arctic glaciers seem to keep guard over the sea. Like sentinels on the edge of the Polar regions they drift slowly back and forth in the Straits, obedient to tide and wind, leaving behind them a long wake of swirling eddies and floating cakes of ice.

Above all a grey, cloudless, cold sky. Everywhere silence. A silence which grips one's heart. A silence which no earthly sound would seem able to shatter. A silence which one hears.

On the very edge of the highest cliff, a man stands alone. Dressed in seal skin, bare-headed, his long, coarse black hair thrown back and mingling with the dog fur trimming of his hood—the Eskimo hunter is watching the sea. His weather-beaten face is inscrutable. With slanting

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

eyelids narrowed, his black eyes stare into space without a quiver of an eyelash. His square jaw is closed tightly. One hand is holding by the barrel a rifle in its greasy case. The other clutches a rawhide cartridge pouch.

The man has been there every day for weeks. Today, after two hours' watch, he suddenly wheels around, drops his cartridge pouch, picks a handful of cartridges and loads his rifle. His task finished, he looks again towards the sea for a full minute. Then, satisfied, he raises the rifle to his shoulder and fires six shots at regular intervals.

The crack of the Winchester shatters the silence—echoes along the cliff—sending down towards the sea wave after wave of sound which, in turn, is picked up and flung back by each gully and by each wave throughout the mass of granite.

Startled from its nest, an eagle dashes from the cliff, sweeps up to the level of the man, remains motionless for a fraction of a second poised in air—then uttering a shrill cry, lashes with its wings and dives into space.

Far down on the beach, amid the rocks which form a natural slide to the sea, tiny specks appear moving hurriedly back and forth. These are Eskimos, comrades of the man who stands guard hundreds of feet above them.

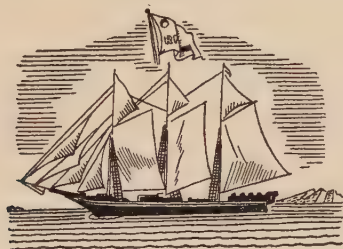
Their skin tents, huddled together in the chaotic mass of stone, remain invisible to the eye. They have heard the signal and their excitement is great. Smaller specks run about the beach. Some dash even into the icy water which flings them back in a blind, white smother of foam. These are the dogs, the sleigh Huskies, the faithful companions of the natives. Their short, wolf-like howl rises above the general confusion.

In a few minutes a white puff of smoke is seen, followed

♦ ♦ ♦ *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH*

shortly by the quick bark of the rifle. Then another explosion is heard until the spluttering of a general fusilade rends the air . . . answering the six shots fired from the top of the cliff.

Far out at sea, looming ghostlike through the fog, threading her cautious way amidst the icebergs—a three-masted auxiliary schooner appears. On her foremast flies the REVILLON FRÈRES flag. It is the supply ship which, once a year, calls on those desolate regions.







Tale XXXIII:

*Whiskey Jack*

**I**N NORTHERN CANADA, BIRDS MIGRATE south as soon as the winter sets in. The only ones who remain throughout the entire cold season are the Ravens, the little Arctic Owls and the Jays which are known from the Atlantic to the Pacific as Whiskey Jacks. The latter can be found everywhere in the bush. Although they shun the most northern villages and settlements, still they can not live far away from the haunts of men. Therefore one sees them hovering around every likely spot along all the trails, either on land or by the water, in the neighborhood of lumber camps, trapping shacks, hunting caches and portages. As soon as the traveler appears in one of those places, a small flock of Whiskey Jacks appear flitting from one tree top to another, calling, shrieking, whistling, ever on the lookout for any sign of food.

There is a superstition in the North which claims that the killing of a Whiskey Jack brings bad luck. No one, even an Indian, would ever think of harming them. The result is that, being very tame, they often prove themselves regular pests in camp. Their only idea seems to be to hoard food for winter use. And from early spring until late fall one can see them picking up any available scrap which they stow away in various tree holes.



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

Their boldness is always a source of amusement to the traveler. I have seen Whiskey Jacks pounce on a piece of bacon in the frying pan and succeed in carrying it away; others raid an empty tent and steal any small thing they can find. They often get in trouble—the unlucky one then uttering the most extraordinary shrieks which are always taken up by all the other birds. It is a common occurrence to see one poke its head into an empty tin and have a great deal of difficulty in getting it out. Some, raiding a tent, get their claws caught in the mosquito net, while others hovering around a camp fire singe their tails and wings in a mad scramble for some half cooked titbit.

The funniest jam I ever saw a Whiskey Jack get into was when the bird found a bowl on the ground filled with pieces of bannock soaked in rum. The bird was hungry and gobbled five or six pieces before the old prospector found out that his favorite evening dish was in danger. Whiskey Jack flew a few feet away and settled on a branch of a tree. But in a few minutes the liquor took effect. He began giving a series of dismal squawks, cocking his head on one side then on the other, swaying more and more until he actually fell down on the ground, where he lay unable to get up but screeching madly all the time.

The bird was all right again in an hour or so and went on flying around in search of more food, but he obstinately refused any more bannock from any one's hands.



Tale XXXIV:

*Makejo*

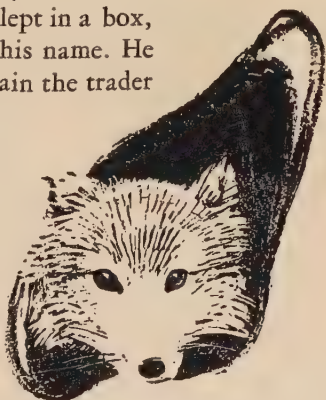
**M**AKEJO, A FULL-GROWN RED FOX, was born on the marshy shores of James Bay. Originally, he belonged to a litter of six pups which a Cree Indian had dug up in the spring and given to our trader at Moose Factory.

The pups were still blind and helpless when they reached human hands. They took kindly to the bottle, but the mixture of condensed milk and plain water on which our man tried to raise them proved a failure. One little fox alone survived the ordeal. That was Makejo.

Although undersized and weak at first, he grew amazingly fast soon after he was weaned. When I saw him two years later he was larger and heavier than any fox of that region. Blood red, with a mask fringed with black and a large white tip at the end of his brush, he was as tame as a dog and as mischevius as a monkey.

He lived in the trader's house, slept in a box, and came instantly at the call of his name. He was a great mouser. Now and again the trader would lock him up in a store-room at night where he would kill dozens of mice, which he would invariably eat — barring the tails.

He would play with the children by the hour and had taught



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

himself any amount of tricks while running madly up and down the house. His chief stunt was a back somersault. He had started doing it while leaping against the wall of the room but ended by doing it at any moment, even from a standing position.

In summer, he was allowed to use a hole cut out for him on one of the windows on the ground floor. He would get out through this to a small ledge, four feet above the ground, where he would pass hours sunning himself and keeping an eye on everything that was going on.

His chief delight was to torment the twenty-odd Post dogs which were always loafing in the neighborhood. They all belonged to the Malamute breed and would have killed him instantly had they been able to catch him. But they never did.

Makejo, from his ledge, would watch the dogs until they were asleep. Then, jumping down like a streak of lightning, he would flash through the pack yelping. In a second every husky was after him. His speed was so marvelous, his eye so quick and his judgment of distance so uncanny, that he would remain several minutes tearing in and out of the dogs with perfect impunity until, with one leap, he would jump on his ledge again and disappear in the house through his little hole.

For all I know, Makejo may still be living  
happily where I saw him last.



*Tale XXXV:*

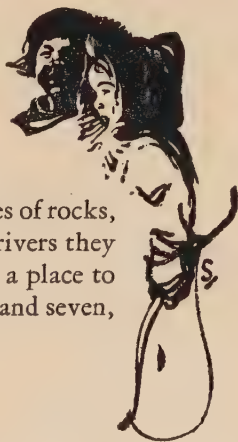
*Two Little Eskimo Boys*

**H**UNDREDS OF STORIES COULD BE TOLD regarding the hardships which form part of the daily life of the Canadian Eskimos, also their resourcefulness and their endurance.

Five years ago in August, near Cape Dufferin, two Eskimos started paddling in their kayaks along the shore. Each man in his little craft had his son—one five years old, the other seven. After a few hours, they decided to go to some islands six miles off shore to look for sea gulls' eggs. Not caring to take the two children out so far, in case a storm came up, they left them on the beach and told them to wait.

The two little boys remained there all day. Night came. They huddled together, shivering, in the lee of a rock. When dawn appeared there were no signs of the two men. Another day and another night passed; still the children waited, feeding on seaweed and small shell fish which they found along the beach.

When the third day came they decided to walk back, following the shore, to the tribe. Going round the bays, climbing up and down huge slides of rocks, walking inland each time they found rivers they could not swim until they discovered a place to ford them, those two boys—aged five and seven, respectively—never lost heart.





## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

Picking up on the beach what they could find to eat, they eventually got back to the tribe after two days and nights of constant traveling. They were footsore, wet to the bone, and famished.

They gave the alarm and a small party of men paddled immediately to the islands. There they found the two men marooned amidst hundreds of nests on which they had been feeding.

It appears that on their arrival, four days before, they had at first gone to sleep on the beach in the sun, leaving their kayaks partly out of the water. The tide rose and the two kayaks drifted out of sight. They had suffered no hardships—having plenty of food and being confident that eventually some one would come to look for them.

Furthermore, they did not feel anxious about the children. In their minds, a thirty mile walk alone on the rugged seashore, the fording of three swift rivers, and the lack of food and the exposure during four consecutive days and nights, could not possibly harm two little Eskimo boys of five and seven.



Tale XXXVI:

*An Indian Warrior*

IT WAS LATE IN THE FALL OF 1916, IN THE Somme, during the War. The Canadian Army in junction with one of the French Army Corps at its right had gone over the top and brilliantly carried an enemy's strong position, two miles deep. The inevitable counter attack had been repulsed and, although the shelling was still vicious, one felt that the show was over for that day. The wounded were streaming out of the communication trenches towards the rear. A few dead bodies were lying about in small groups.

I was passing along quickly, following a sunken road, when I noticed a swarthy Canadian soldier on the ground, apparently dying of his wounds. I happened to be glancing towards him when he looked up, saw me, and, making a sign of the hand, called out clearly, "Nipi". I recognized the word at once and stopped in amazement. The man was a full blooded Cree Indian. He must have volunteered somewhere in Northern Canada, gone overseas, fought, and was now dying all alone in the mud of the Somme. He did not seem to be able to speak a word of English.

I knelt beside him and put my water bottle to his lips. Meanwhile I racked my brain for the few words of Cree I still knew. When he had finished drinking I began slowly to tell him, one by one, all the words I remembered. I said in Cree "lake, fire, bear, moose, tent, axe,

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH . . .

canoe." What else, I do not recall. Dozens of Cree words—one after the other. Then I named in Indian, all the northern places I knew from Labrador to Yukon.

As soon as the Cree warrior heard my first words, he caught hold of my hands with both of his own and held on to them like a drowning man. He looked at me with a startled face, then his expression changed little by little. He was far gone then but he could still hear and understand the words of his native tongue. A far away look came into his dying eyes, his features relaxed and a smile hovered on his lips. He had forgotten the battlefield. His thoughts were away, far away, in some part of the Canadian wilderness which he and I knew.

It was all over in a few seconds. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something and then his soul went West. Suddenly, without a flutter, straight to the Happy Hunting Grounds of his ancestors.



## Tale XXXVII:

### *Burro*

**J**ACK WAS A LITTLE GREY DONKEY. A GENUINE little burro owned by the cook of a lumber camp in northern British Columbia. He was used for odd jobs around the men's quarters and, when off duty, roamed about aimlessly at his own free will. He was old, tame as a dog and very wise.

We hired him one day to carry our grub and blankets on a fishing expedition. We had no fixed place to go. We simply cut across country through bush and hills, stopping to fish at every likely stream, camping when we felt like it. Jack behaved perfectly for three days. He carried his little load quietly and steered his way through any kind of ground according to our instructions, which we telegraphed to him from behind with a tap of the hand or an occasional shove.

On the third day at sundown, we pitched our tent on an old camping ground and found there two large cans of tomatoes which someone had left behind. The next morning, we loaded the little burro and placed the two cans on the top of his pack. Jack gave a grunt and promptly lay down. Nothing would induce him to rise until one of us thought of taking the two cans off. Then he proceeded on his way as if nothing had happened. For at least two hours we tried to fool him with those two tomato tins—but failed utterly. Each time we laid them on his pack, ever so gently from behind, he would stop dead

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

and lie down again. Finally we had to give it up and throw the two cans away.

When the time came to return to the lumber camp, we were not certain of our way. In fact, we had only had a very hazy idea of our direction as we had been travelling in a round about sort of way in a very hilly country thickly covered with large trees. We decided to put our faith in Jack. He seemed to understand that we were going home. He took us back, foot by foot, exactly the same way we had come. His memory was uncanny. All the unnecessary little detours we had made, around a bush or a rock on our way up, he scrupulously made again on the way down. He never changed his pace once. He just jogged along with his head down and his eyes half closed. But nothing would make him step out of what he thought was the proper trail.

Two miles from camp, when we could already see the tents in the valley, we tried to make him take a short cut.

He absolutely refused and showed the usual signs of lying down. He had been in charge all the way back and intended remaining so until we arrived.



Tale XXXVIII:

*Travelling in North Alberta*

EARLY ONE SPRING, I STOPPED AT AN Indian's tepee for a cup of tea, a smoke and a little chat.

In front of the tent, a few yards away, stood the usual platform which all trappers build on four long, vertical piles so as to keep their stock of fish, meat, leather and pelts out of the reach of the dogs.

I was travelling with a team of six Huskies drawing a light sledge and had been making good time on the glaring ice of the lakes and rivers. For, although the snow was nearly all gone in the bush, it still froze hard each night.

Before leaving the camp I asked the Indian to sell me some white fish for dog feed, of which I was short. He had plenty of it. I knew that he kept the frozen fish on the platform. He readily granted my request and while he busied himself disentangling the traces of my leader, which had got mixed up with a stump, I climbed on an empty box so as to reach the rack and get the fish.

Just at that moment the Indian shouted to me to take twenty fish which were already wrapped up in a dunnage bag, ready for packing on a sleigh. I glanced around, saw a brown package about two feet long and, without bothering to lift it, with one hand I pushed it so that it fell off the platform on to the ground.

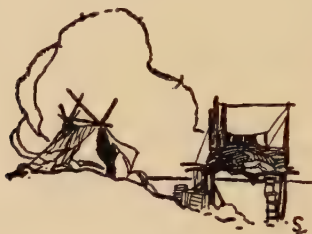
As soon as it hit the frozen earth I noticed the peculiar



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

sound it made—a crack like the branch of a tree snapping in the frost. Jumping down, I opened the parcel. There lay the dead body of a six months old child.

It was the Indian's youngest baby. It had died at Christmas time and the man had stored it on the rack, far out of reach of the prowling dogs, until the Summer came and the ground thawed out sufficiently to enable him to dig its little grave.



Tale XXXIX:

*Mother and Cubs*

LATE ONE EVENING IN AUGUST, OUR SHIP was plowing her way through a sea of slushy ice and small pans in Hudson Straits. The weather was dead calm. Ahead of us, to the Northwest, the sun was sinking over the horizon, staining sky and ice in crimson. Astern—to starboard—miles away, the rugged coast of Baffin Land loomed up, faint and dark.

The only sound which struck the ear was the steady droning of the engine; while now and then a pan of ice, cut in two by the ship's stern, cracked under the impact, then groaned and grinded as it slid and was crushed under the keel.

Suddenly a sharp cry rang out from the crow's nest, "White bear ahead—a she bear with two cubs. Two points at starboard." Instantly every one rushed to the bow. Five hundred yards away, floundering through the ice, in and out of the water, was a great big bear. She had seen us and was trying to get away. A few yards in front of her were two small cubs—four months old—struggling hard to keep ahead of their mother.

The whole crew was in a turmoil of excitement. The skipper already had a rifle in his hands. So had the cook and one of the sailors. For a long time the bears were able to keep their



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

distance. The pans of ice were large and fairly close together. Mother and cubs would climb on one—race a few hundred yards—dive, swim a few feet—then get out of the water and run again.

Meanwhile the ship had to wind her way between the ice, or butt the heaviest pans which sometimes slowed her down completely. We reached at last a spot where the ice was scattered. Huge lakes separated each pan.

Although the bears swam bravely, the ship was gaining on them. In a few minutes we were almost on top of them—just as they reached some more ice and climbed on it.

The young animals were now getting exhausted. The cubs, their tongues out, were giving signs of distress. Their only idea was to stop, lie down, bury their heads in their front paws and rest. But the old mother was undaunted. She turned around, faced the ship, rose on her hind legs and gazed steadily at us towering above her. Then, turning around like a flash, she lifted each groveling cub with a jerk of her snout, cuffed its hind quarters hard with a swift tap of her front paw and launched both of them again, ahead of her in full flight. This she repeated time and again. Her courage was so amazing that no one fired a shot.

Finally we reached a last pan of ice on the very edge of the floe. Further on was the open sea. Mother and cubs scrambled on that piece of ice a few yards in front of which the steamer had been put down to "dead slow". The little cubs "were done". They just lay on the ice and panted. The mother could have taken to the water—dived like a duck—made a bid for her life. But she remained beside her young, facing the ship squarely,

• • • *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH*

silently, fearlessly. Her jaws were half open in a snarl. Now and then she would lift a front paw and cuff the air as if she wanted to show how hard she could hit our steel stern if ever our vessel touched her.

There was silence on board. Suddenly our skipper's voice rang out: "Hard over at port", while the telegraph rang, "Full speed ahead". The same voice called out again: "Leave those bears alone, you sons of b . . . ."

As the ship swung over—gathered way and passed the pan of ice—three blasts of the steamer's foghorn blared out in a salute! It was the old Newfoundland master. He was leaning over the side of his bridge, waving to the old she bear who still stood, undaunted, right over the bodies of her two little cubs.





*Tale XL:*

*An old Trader*

FIFTEEN YEARS OR SO AGO, I KNEW AN old trader, a Scotchman, who had then lived forty years in the far North. His only link with civilization was the supply ship which called at his Post, once a year, in summer.

In those days radios were unknown. The man was content with one mail a year. As soon as the vessel had left his station, he was entirely cut off from the rest of the world until the next summer.

He worked for a rival company and for several years I never had an occasion to meet him, although we had a trading station of our own a few miles down the coast.

In 1911, our steamer was passing his Post when we saw a whale boat, manned by four Eskimos, coming out to meet us. In the stern sat the old man. Knowing that our ship was the first in that year, we slowed down expecting that the trader was in some kind of trouble.

As soon as he got within hailing distance he stood up, put his hands to his mouth and shouted: "Good morning! Who won the fight?" For a few seconds we were so surprised that none of us could speak. Meanwhile, the small boat remained bobbing up and down on the swell; the old man still standing and looking up toward the bridge.





## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

Suddenly it dawned upon the skipper that the old Scotchman was one year back in his news, and that he was inquiring about the famous "Jim Jeffries-Jack Johnson" fight which had taken place exactly thirteen months before!

Our ship being the first in, he could not wait until his own vessel arrived, bringing him a whole year's collection of daily newspapers. He simply had to satisfy his craving for news of that fight over which he had pondered, alone, during twelve long months. "Jack Johnson won by a knock-out", we all shouted down to him. He heard us the first time. Lifting his hand over his head as a sign of thanks, he sat down without a word and motioned the Esquimos to row back to shore.

Meanwhile our skipper telegraphed "Full speed ahead" and we proceeded on our way.



## Tale XLI:

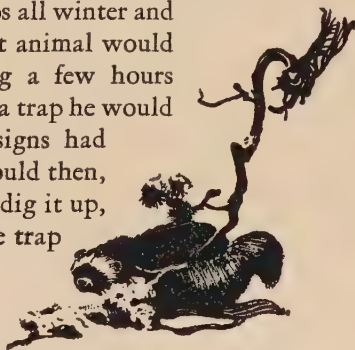
### *Wolverine*

THE WOLVERINE HAS AN EXCEED-  
ingly bad reputation among all men, white  
or red, who make their living by trapping in  
the Far North. If one believed the stories of  
some of the older Indians, one would think  
that the animal had a superhuman intelligence added to a  
positive mania for destruction.

To look at, the Wolverine is not very formidable. I  
heard, one day, a white trapper describe him as an over-  
grown badger that could not grunt quite as well as a pig  
but could climb trees far more easily than a bear.

Discarding the exaggeration which generally goes with  
all tales concerning the animal, there is no doubt that the  
Wolverine is very cunning and is inclined to be mis-  
chevious as far as traps and supplies are concerned.

I know of one authentic case where an Indian had to  
change his trap lines; in fact, quit the country altogether  
and go elsewhere because of a Wolverine who had made  
up his mind to dodge his footsteps all winter and  
feed on his baits and game. That animal would  
follow the man's trail, starting a few hours  
behind him. Each time he got to a trap he would  
find it, although the tell-tale signs had  
been brushed off the snow. He would then,  
through smell, locate the chain, dig it up,  
jerk it with his teeth, spring the trap  
and eat the bait.



## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

For weeks the Indian tried to shoot that Wolverine, but failed. When the man, knowing through experience that he was followed, turned back suddenly in his footsteps or remained hidden on his own trail, the Wolverine, sensing the danger, would stop and vanish for the time being. As soon as the trapper proceeded on his way, the animal would follow and resume his mischief.

Once in Labrador, I had a cache raided by a Wolverine during the summer. We had left some grub, clothing and cooking utensils in a waterproof bag securely lashed to the branch of a tree. When we returned, the bag was gone. The Wolverine had managed to crawl down the branch and cut the rope. After that he had torn everything open, eaten every piece of food he could get his teeth in and destroyed or defiled all the clothing. But what really made us mad was the fact that he had carried away and hidden the tins of pork and beans and lard which he could not have opened anyway, however strong were his jaws.

The only thing which we recovered intact was a brand new kettle—and then we had to climb a tree for it. The Wolverine had carried it half way up a spruce and left it wedged between two branches.



*Tale XLII:*

*"Spot" . . . Again*

I HAVE ALREADY SPOKEN ABOUT THAT DOG. I had him on my team six winters. He was the most human "husky" I have ever known.

In the spring when the ice begins to cut all dogs' feet, he would always be the first to ask for his moccasins. He would not sulk, go lame, whimper or run out of the trail. He would stop dead in his tracks, lie on his back, stretch and wave his four legs straight in the air and howl until each moccasin was fastened securely to each foot.

In camp at nights if he was not tied up, he would burrow in the snow until he was completely hidden, and remain there out of sight until the team was ready to leave. No amount of calling and coaxing would induce him to leave his hole, which was generally so well hidden that it was impossible to find it. But as soon as he felt the other six dogs in harness ready to go, he would burst out of the snow and slip on his own collar with a toss of his nose while he looked around anxiously to see if the driver was coming to fasten his girth.

Poor, dear, old Spot! He died in 1913, in harness. He was getting old and the last trip was too much for him. After a week of bitter suffering, he fell in the traces. We put him on the sleigh. His pride forbade him to be drawn by the team. He rolled off in the snow and tried to get back to his place in the lead. He was very weak but he

## *PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH . . .*

still snarled defiance at the young dogs who were doing the work without him.

Little by little, even out of harness, he could not follow the pace. He fell back on the trail. All day he struggled behind us. That night he joined the camp two hours after dark. He refused his food but, heartbroken, insisted upon searching for his harness which had been put aside on the sleigh.

Early the next morning before anyone stirred in camp, my man shot him in his sleep. We could not leave him behind us to eat his heart out in the wilderness, then fall the prey to a roaming pack of timber wolves. Poor, dear, old Spot!



## Tale XLIII:

### *Homesick*

**S**COTTY" was a little clerk in one of our most northern Indian trading stations. He had applied for a position with us in Imverness and had come over in steerage to Halifax. From there he had traveled by train to Montreal, then to Winnipeg, Prince Albert and Le Pas. Finally he had been transported by canoe five hundred miles to his new Post. He landed one afternoon in August and introduced himself to the trader.

I happened to be there at the time. His luggage consisted of a small hand bag, much the worse for the wear, and a large flat wooden box. He was very silent during the evening meal and left us immediately afterwards.

An hour or so later, just as night was falling, a weird scream smote our ears. It came from somewhere in the bush and sounded like the haunting wail of something inhuman. "God, a banshee!" murmured the trader, crossing himself. I thought of a strange night bird — a prowling wolf — a lonely Indian dog. Then it came again, this time louder. We left the shack and walked in the direction of the noise. Meanwhile the wail, after echoing





## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

faster and faster, had changed into one continuous screech.

Indians—men, women and children—were turning out of their tepees and running towards the sound. We finally reached a small clearing and halted in front of a large spruce tree. We knew instinctively that the thing—whatever it was—was there. It had ceased wailing a few seconds, and we were anxiously peering into the shadows. Suddenly something moved in front of us and we held our breath. Then a small figure, which had been crouching unseen at the foot of the tree, rose, and a savage burst of wild music rang out.

It was "Scotty", marching out of the darkness, blowing a huge bagpipe clasped in his arms. His face was purple and his eyes were half closed. Round and round he marched, oblivious of everything, while the Indians, stupefied by such an instrument and such a noise, milled around like staring sheep and followed each one of his movements.

For a half hour we listened to the little man. Not once did he stop. His homesick soul was singing through those blood-curdling, shrieking pipes.

Late into the night, after turning in, we still heard him. Followed by the entire native population and surrounded by at least a hundred howling dogs, he was marching away from the Post, following the edge of the lake and playing  
"The Campbells are Coming".





Tale XLIV:

*The Call of the Wild North of Fifty-three*

**Y**OU MEN WHO LIVE IN CITIES—WHO toil, day in and day out, in the thick of noisy, teeming multitudes, under artificial lights, under roofs, behind glass, in offices and factories far away from the sun and the air, the light and the wind—don't you feel at times something tugging at your heart-strings?

Don't you feel a great longing for something new, something clean, something different from what you have been accustomed to? Don't you hear, now and then, a whispering coming from nowhere in particular and calling you? Calling and calling in the middle of the night when you lie awake; in the flush of dawn when you catch a gleam of the sky from your open window; in the evening when your work is done and when you find yourself going home? Do you know what I mean? Have you felt it?

It is the "Call of the Wild", the oldest call of all—the call coming to you through generations and generations who have ignored it.

Some people may laugh; others may wonder. But the man who has answered that call will never forget it. He may return to civilization. He may cling to the memory of the discomforts and hardships only. He may endeavor not to wipe out of his mind the haunting feeling of solitude and loneliness which gripped him at times in the bleak wilderness through which he roamed. But sooner

## PLAIN TALES OF THE NORTH • • •

or later, the longing to go back there will come to him again and, if he cannot do so he will always regret it.

Utter freedom! A camp pitched here, a meal cooked there. The sun rising while the crimson of sunset is still glowing in the West. The dull roar of the rapid in the distance. The sharp howl of the hunting wolf. The shimmer of the birch leaves. The hammering of the woodpecker. The splash of the fish rising to the surface of the lake. The plaintive call of the reed-warbler. The murmuring of the jack-pines. The Northern lights dancing silently in the sky.

Peace and utter freedom!









• ESTABLISHED 1723 •

PRIVATELY PRINTED FOR THE  
PATRONS OF REVILLON FRÈRES  
IN NOVEMBER : MCMXXV

DESIGNED BY RICHARD W. ELLIS FOR GARAMOND PRESS INC. BALTIMORE

















